

Review Articles

Government Publications: Documentation and Distribution

Public Documents and World War II, Papers Presented Before the Committee on Public Documents, American Library Association, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 23 and 25, 1942. Jerome K. Wilcox, ed. American Library Association, 1942. 118p. \$2.

IN ADDITION to the normal common denominators of time, place, and subject to be expected in a symposium, the papers in this collection have another and far more important similarity which brings them into close sympathy with each other and which poses the most important problem yet to be solved by librarians and archivists: How can prompt and comprehensive bibliography, coupled with rapid and efficient distribution, be achieved?

Articles by Scudder and Wilcox present in discouraging detail the increasing acquisition difficulties brought about by Office of War Information attempts to "clear channels for war information," by the mushrooming of new agencies and publishing offices, and by the again increased use of processing equipment. A turn to the discussion of British documents by W. C. Dalgoutte of the British Information Services reveals an almost identical situation in Great Britain, which differs only in that it is further confounded by a serious paper shortage. Mrs. Cabeen, writing on the publications of European governments in exile, provides comprehensive bibliographies of those publications but finds it necessary to add, "no brief is held for their completeness in view of

the uncertainty of communication and the lack of official bibliography." And Wilcox, writing this time on the "Official War Publications of Canada," is called upon to qualify his compilation with the "hope that this list is comprehensive." Throughout the volume is revealed continual struggle of librarians to list and acquire the important publications being issued—a struggle frequently ending in frustration before increasing numbers of documents listed nowhere at all or listed too late to make acquisition possible.

The most fundamental problem is that of bibliography, or, preferably, documentation, for the term "bibliography" bears overtones of selectivity, the prevalence of which in present document listing is the cause of much of our difficulty. The *Weekly List* is admittedly selective, the *Monthly Catalog* is only relatively more complete, and the *Document Catalog*, despite its greater size and more careful cataloging, adds comparatively few titles to those appearing in the *Monthly Catalog*. In Britain the *Consolidated List of Government Publications* is limited to those comparatively few items available for sale, and Canada apparently makes no attempt at official bibliography at all.

The reasons for this rather indiscriminate attention to government documentation are not difficult to find in our own federal government and in the state governments as well; the situation in Canada and Britain is not far different. Even though Congress and a few states, notably

California, have tried to centralize all printing in one government office, so great is the centrifugal force engendered in the spreading of the printed (or mimeographed) word that no law of Congress nor any budgetary limitation, however specifically it is phrased, can prevent the printing or duplication of some material apart from the centrally established printing office. In an organization as large as the federal government we might as well give up trying, and that is precisely what has, in effect, been done. But that should not mean that the 1895 objective of a comprehensive listing of all government publications should be given up as well but means rather that efforts at complete documentation must be doubled and redoubled, just because actual publication is so widespread.

The job is not an impossible one. In 1939 approximately thirty-six thousand items were listed in the *Monthly Catalog*, of which about two thirds were single issues of a much smaller number of periodical publications. In the same year the Superintendent of Documents received another fourteen thousand items which were not listed in the *Monthly Catalog*. Even if we doubled this figure of fifty thousand items a year by including all processed material published in Washington and all material, printed and processed, published in the field, as well as maps, charts, restricted and confidential material not now listed, the estimated one hundred thousand items a year do not represent an impossible bibliographical project. The job can be done if the library and archival professions can somehow convince the proper authorities that it needs to be done if the vast publishing program of the federal government is to achieve its maximum ef-

fectiveness, both in terms of the immediate usefulness of the material being published and in terms of giving scholars and historians access to the published records of the largest civil government in history.

The details involved in organizing such a project need not be described here. Almost any imaginative librarian or archivist could develop a practicable plan which would need only slight modifications in the course of being placed in operation. A brief outline of objectives would include the need for current listing of all publications within two weeks of publication; the inclusion of all publications, printed and processed, restricted and confidential, those published in the field (including offices abroad) as well as those issued in Washington; annual cumulation or at least annual cumulative indexing; and the continuation of present efforts toward cumulative subject cataloging in the biennial *Document Catalog*. Considerable economy in current listing could be achieved by listing each periodical only once each year, with such current additions as changes in title, format, or frequency make necessary. The codification of many publications into new or existing periodicals or series would also simplify economical listing as well as facilitate efficient document distribution.

Second to the problems of documentation only because proper listing must chronologically precede effective distribution are the problems incident to placing sufficient copies of all government publications where they are needed and wanted and where their authors, publishers, and distributors want them to be. The second of these two categories hardly merits our attention here, for the much maligned body of information experts on federal payrolls

is quite capable of the solution of that problem whenever it is given sufficient money and authority to put a specific program across. The distribution of a much more limited number of publications to the people who want and need them is apparently a much more difficult problem, calling for the best judgment and planning of which archivists, librarians, and scholars are capable.

The American Library Association and its Committee on Public Documents have long been at work on the problem, not without some success in certain specific fields, but no major attack on the problem as a whole has in recent years been allowed a considered hearing in either congressional or bureaucratic halls. The most recent such attempt is reported elsewhere in this issue. Its probable success is not yet known, but even if all of its recommendations come to pass for the duration of the war and are allowed to stand during the peace that is to follow, the resultant plan of document distribution will not yet be the best of all possible plans.

The time for the development of such a plan is probably not yet. The chaotic maldistribution of government publications which now obtains in this country and others must probably become a good deal worse, a good deal more tangled and impossible to handle before the learned professions assemble willing hands and ample funds to upset the whole apple cart and begin anew. Such beginning anew must start with a current and comprehensive bibliography broadly planned on a sound basis of adequate and permanent documentation of all items as they are published, must follow through with ample stocks of all publications to meet known and anticipated demand, must provide im-

mediate and complete distribution of all or selected documents to the libraries and archives known to be fully equipped in space, administration, and personnel to care for them properly, and must make available immediately on publication or on application those documents which individuals, scholars, and farmers alike need and want for the prosecution of the many activities government publications are designed to assist. Such a distribution program would somehow cut the gordian knot of sales versus free distribution, somehow resolve the apparently irrepressible conflict between printing and processing, and silence once and for all the vociferous critics of "wasteful distribution." The statement on "Government Publishing in Wartime" is a step in the right direction; many more such steps and a few leaps and bounds are needed if the millennium in document production, documentation, and distribution is to be achieved in our time. —*LeRoy Charles Merritt, State Teachers College Library, Farmville, Va.*

Subject Guide to Reference Books. Herbert S. Hirshberg. American Library Association, 1942. xvi, 260p. \$4.

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE of this book can best be given in the author's own prefatory statement that it "attempts to provide an alphabetic subject guide to the books needed by libraries for the answering of questions frequently asked. It is designed to be a ready reference tool for the librarian's desk and to point the way to or recall sources of information in books commonly held as well as some less well known." To this purpose it is admirably suited.

It is an alphabetic list of topics covered at lengths which vary from the five titles